

A *Parent's* Guide To the New *Grade Eight* *Proficiency Assessment*



Last March all eighth grade public school students in New Jersey took a new series of tests known as the Grade Eight Proficiency Assessment (GEPA) to measure their abilities in language arts literacy and math.

This document is intended to serve as a guide to parents to explain the purpose of the GEPA, interpret the results of the assessment and offer suggestions on how to help your child achieve academic success.

The importance of parents to their children's performance in school can not be overstated:
Parents are their children's first and most important teachers.

Your interest and involvement in the education of your children can be the key to their success in school and in life.

What every parent should know about changes in New Jersey's curriculum standards and assessment program

Raising educational standards is essential for students to lead successful, productive lives as adults. New Jersey has approved a more rigorous set of core curriculum content standards so your children will have the knowledge and skills necessary to meet the challenges that await them in the 21st century. New Jersey has also developed a new statewide assessment program to find out how students are meeting the new higher standards.

Tests have changed to accommodate the times. Traditional classroom tests in subjects such as math, science, reading and writing are drawn from your child's actual schoolwork. They are much the same as the tests today's adults took as children. The results of these tests and other factors, such as the teacher's evaluation of conduct and performance in the classroom, are components of your child's report card. In addition, some schools use standardized achievement tests such as the CAT (California Achievement Test) at different grade levels to measure student progress against state and national averages.

Classroom and standardized achievement tests are different than the new **Elementary School Proficiency Assessment (ESPA)** given to fourth and fifth graders and the **Grade Eight Proficiency Assessment (GEPA)** given to eighth graders. The ESPA and GEPA measure how well your child is meeting the new higher standards of education. But the ESPA and GEPA scores are not reflected on your child's report card, nor are they the sole determinant as to whether your child is promoted to the next grade level.

This new assessment program provides more accurate information to show schools, teachers and parents how well their children are measuring up to the new standards. It is a diagnostic tool that will allow the state and local school districts to have an immediate and powerful impact on the quality of education offered to all public school students.

Christine Todd Whitman
Governor



David Hespe
Commissioner
New Jersey Department of Education



How to read your child's test results

The GEPA language arts literacy and mathematics scores are reported as scale scores with a range of 100 to 300. Scores at or above 250 indicate "Advanced Proficient." Scores from 200 to 249 indicate "Proficient." If your child is in the "Advanced Proficient" or "Proficient" level, he/she has met the state standards for that content area. Scores below 200 indicate your child performed at the "Partially Proficient" level and has not met the state's minimum level of proficiency, based on this test administration, and may need some type of additional instructional support.

Your child's report is available only to parents, guardians, and authorized school officials. If you have any questions about the report, you should contact your child's teacher or principal. He or she can help you interpret the information on the score report and explain what the instructional staff is doing and what you can do to help your child master the skills measured on the test. Special programs and related services will be provided for the child after the parent and school staff determine his/her needs.

Two content areas were assessed on the 1999 GEPA: language arts literacy and mathematics.

Your child's scale score on each content area. Scale scores range from a low of 100 to a high of 300.

Based on your child's test scores, his or her performance is characterized as "Partially Proficient", "Proficient", or "Advanced Proficient."

Indicates if your child was identified as a student with limited English proficiency (LEP); a special education student (SE); exempt from testing based on an individual education plan (IEP); or receiving Title I services (Title I).

**New Jersey Statewide Assessment System
Grade Eight Proficiency Assessment
Individual Student Report**

Test Date: March 1999

County: District: School:

Date of Birth: Gender:

LEP: SE: IEP Exempt: Title I:

Test ID No.: Answer Folder No.: District/School Student ID No:

Student Name:

Content Area	Your Score	Proficiency Level
Language Arts Literacy	198	Partially Proficient
Mathematics	164	Partially Proficient

Partially Proficient: Score BELOW 200

Proficient: Score AT OR ABOVE 200 but BELOW 250

Advanced Proficient: Score AT OR ABOVE 250

Language Arts Literacy

The Language Arts Literacy section assesses a student's abilities in the following clusters. A check mark indicates the areas of possible strength.

	Your Score	Just Proficient Mean	
Writing (26) ¹	9.0 out of 26	10.6	
Reading (36) ¹	20.0 out of 36	18.9	✓
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Interpreting Text (14) ¹	9.0 out of 14	8.2	✓
Analyzing/Critiquing (22) ¹ Text	11.0 out of 22	10.8	✓

¹ The number in parentheses is the total number of points possible.

Mathematics

The Mathematics section assesses a student's abilities in the following clusters. A check mark indicates the areas of possible strengths.

	Your Score	Just Proficient Mean
Number Sense, Concepts, & Applications (14) ¹	0.0 out of 14	6.9
Spatial Sense & Geometry (14) ¹	3.0 out of 14	5.0
Data Analysis, Probability, Statistics, & Discrete Mathematics (14) ¹	2.5 out of 14	5.6
Patterns, Functions, & Algebra (14) ¹	5.0 out of 14	6.5
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Knowledge (56) ¹	10.5 out of 56	24.0
Problem Solving (34) ¹	5.5 out of 34	13.0

The GEPA language arts literacy components contain two content clusters* (above the dotted line) and two skill clusters* (below the dotted line).

Defines "Partially Proficient", "Proficient", or "Advanced Proficient."

Indicates the number of points your child earned out of the total number of points possible for the cluster*. For example, this student earned 20 of the possible 36 points in Reading.

The "Just Proficient Mean" is the average number of points earned by students who were just proficient (i.e., scored 200) in this content area.

A ✓ indicates that your child scored higher on this cluster* than the average for students who were "just proficient" in this area.

The GEPA mathematics components contain four content clusters* (above the dotted line) and two skills clusters* (below the dotted line).

*A cluster is a group of items that measure similar skills. The skills in a given cluster are typically taught together to allow students to make appropriate connections.

To help you better understand the benefits of the GEPA and your child's score, the New Jersey Department of Education is providing the answers to the most frequently asked questions. See next two pages.

Frequently asked

Why is there a need for higher standards and a new test?

The world is very different than the one today's parents knew as children. There are stunning breakthroughs in medicine, science, technology, commerce and culture on an almost daily basis. Prior to 1975, academic success was based on how well students performed in relation to their classmates. Today, students compete on a global basis. Our ever-changing economy demands new types of workers with new types of advanced skills. To prepare students for the challenges that await them in college and the workplace, New Jersey has developed new, more rigorous standards in several key curriculum areas. Teachers, principals and parents, as well as representatives of the business community and the New Jersey Legislature, participated in the formulation of the new standards, which were approved by the State Board of Education. More than 1,000 people contributed to the process. Regional meetings and focus groups were held. An informational video was produced by the Department of Education and made available to the public. The new standards were published in the newspapers and sent to every district for review. This was one of the most ambitious and comprehensive public outreach efforts ever conducted by the department. The **Grade Eight Proficiency Assessment (GEPA)** was designed to enable schools, teachers and parents to know how well children are measuring up to these higher standards.

What is this new "assessment"?

The GEPA measures what students know and can do in language arts literacy (reading and writing) and math, which are two of the content areas covered by the state's higher core curriculum content standards. In the future, five more subjects will be added. They are science (in the 1999-2000 school year), social studies (in the 2000-2001 school year), visual and performing arts (2001-2002), health and physical education (2002-2003), and world languages (2003-2004). You can learn more about these areas of expertise by logging onto the New Jersey Department of Education's website at: <http://www.state.nj.us/njded/cccs/index.html>. The Department of Education involved the public and education practitioners in the development of the new assessment from the very beginning of the process. Using the best national model available, education experts formulated and then validated the test. Practitioners, including New Jersey public school teachers, determined how the test should be scored.

What should parents and students expect of the new test?

The GEPA is a new experience for students and teachers. It replaces the Grade 8 Early Warning Test (EWT) and is aligned with the new, more rigorous core curriculum content standards. The results of this first test administration were characteristic of those traditionally seen whenever a decision is made to implement and assess higher standards. What parents must remember is that New Jersey students did not suddenly become less proficient; they were just measured for the first time against higher standards so a new benchmark could be set. As schools and teachers adjust the curriculum to concentrate on areas of weakness, scores will improve.

Will these results be used to decide which students should be promoted to the next grade level?

The GEPA is not a promotion test. Students do not have to "pass" the GEPA to proceed to the next grade. It is a diagnostic tool that informs teachers and parents how well students are mastering the knowledge and skills they will need to pass the High School Proficiency Assessment (HSPA) that will replace the current Grade 11 High School Proficiency Test (HSPT) in the 2001-2002 school year.

Can the GEPA results be compared to the EWT scores?

No. The GEPA scores must not be compared to the EWT scores because the two tests differ in specifications, proficiency levels and the types of questions.

How is the GEPA different from other tests?

It is different in three ways. First, the test questions are tied directly to the new content that students are expected to know by the eighth grade. Second, test results are based on the progress your child is making toward meeting the new curriculum standards. They are not based on how well your child is doing compared to other children. Third, the information learned from the test can help teachers and schools provide your child with a better educational program tailored to meet his or her specific needs. The GEPA expects more of students than traditional tests.

Questions and Answers

How is the test scored?

The GEPA contains both multiple-choice questions that are machine-scored and open-ended items, such as essays, which are scored by trained raters. The maximum point score is 300. Student performance is reported by level: partially proficient (199 and below), proficient (200 to 249) and advanced proficient (250 and above). A nationally renowned panel of education experts governed the process used to establish cutoff scores, which were set by teachers.

Will my child's test results be made public?

No individual student's test results will be made public. Only you, your child and your child's teacher will ever know the results. However, average results for your child's school and district will be made public as part of the New Jersey School Report Card.

What were the statewide averages for the GEPA?

The statewide average test results in math showed that 38% of the students were partially proficient, 43% proficient and 19% advanced proficient. In language arts literacy, 22% were partially proficient, 71% proficient and 7% advanced proficient.

Why did some children have trouble with the math segment?

The knowledge and skills expected of students in this subject focused on problem-solving and demonstrating that they can use math in a practical way. This is a strong move away from simple computation, which was more prevalent in earlier tests.

There was a field test for language arts literacy and science administered to the eighth graders during March 1999. The GEPA speaking assessment was also field tested that month. Will the results of these tests be made public?

Results from field tests are not publicly reported. The purpose of field testing is to "test the tests" to develop new test questions and to help select questions for use on future versions of the GEPA.

Why categorize students who are not measuring up to the new standards "partially proficient" instead of non-proficient?

The terms partially proficient, proficient and advanced proficient are specified in federal law and nationally accepted. They are based on the premise that no student is completely

lacking in the wide range of knowledge and skills contained in curriculum standards. The term "partial" recognizes the fact that all students have some degree of proficiency in the subject areas we assess and they can build on this knowledge base to achieve higher levels in the future.

Will any special programs or services be available to help children if their test results are low?

Your school district is responsible for assuring that every child receives a thorough and efficient education, as defined by state law and regulation. If your child's grade is partially proficient, your school will take steps to help your son or daughter meet the standards. The New Jersey Department of Education is prepared to help your school in its efforts to assure that every child is challenged and makes real progress in the future.

How long is the test?

The typical testing day is confined to the morning. The longest period of testing time without a break is 45 minutes. On any given day, total student testing time (excluding directions and breaks) is no more than two hours.

Will any changes be made to the test?

In consultation with our colleagues in the education community, we are constantly evaluating our testing program to make sure our statewide assessments are appropriate, time-efficient and relevant. We have already decided to substantially reduce testing time. The language arts literacy (reading and writing) component of the March 2000 GEPA will be shortened by 90 minutes. As new content areas are developed, attention will be given to the overall test length, and every step will be taken to minimize the amount of time students spend on assessments.

When will the results of the March 2000 GEPA be available?

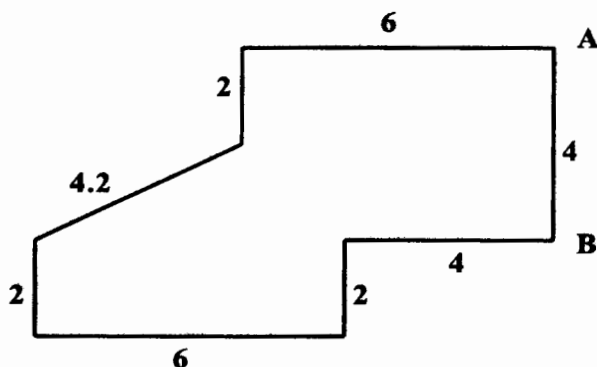
In 2000, the GEPA results will be reported in June.

How can I get more information about the GEPA?

Information about the GEPA is available from:
The New Jersey Department of Education
Office of Assessment
PO Box 500
Trenton, New Jersey, 08625-0500
Phone: 609-777-3672

Math

1. Christine is enlarging the figure below so that the side corresponding to \overline{AB} will be 6 units long.



What will be the perimeter of the enlargement?

- a. 30.2 units
 - ★ b. 45.3 units
 - c. 54.3 units
 - d. 60.4 units
2. If 4 out of 7 people in Swedesboro use Ultrawhite Laundry Detergent, find the approximate number of people that use Ultrawhite if there are 5271 people in Swedesboro.
- a. 1757
 - ★ b. 3012
 - c. 5260
 - d. 9975
3. In a factory, 54,650 parts were made. When they were tested, 4% were found to be defective. How many parts were good?
- a. 2186
 - ★ b. 52,464
 - c. 54,646
 - d. 56,836

Questions

Language Arts Literacy

One student has written a letter to the school newspaper opposing a community service requirement in your school district. Read her first draft and think about how to improve the meaning and the clarity of the text. Then make your revisions.

Dear Editor,

I am writing you this letter to let you know how I feel about the proposal. Even though many people would probably disagree, I feel very strongly for it and I hope everything goes as planed.

I'm sure there will be students who will feel that they shouldn't have to do this, but if you think about it, they really should. This is our community. We should be mature and responsible enough ot take out that little time to help others and make our community a better one.

Although I feel this is a great idea, I don't feel it should be a requirement. If there are some people who don't feel they have to do this then let them be. There will be people who would have to help our community including me and we will feel great about ourselves afterwards.

Helping others and doing things to help others and out community will make me feel really good about myself. I'm hope this will all go through and I'm sure it will. We just have to get eeryone to feel the same way.

Now I would just like to thank you for listening to my thoughts and ideas. I hope this becomes a big success.

Yours truely,

How parents can help their children achieve high standards

Expect success at school

Children work best when they know what you expect of them. Discuss your expectations for good grades, attendance and study habits with your children. When there is a choice, encourage them to take courses that will challenge and interest them, but not overwhelm them.

View unsatisfactory grades as an opportunity

All parents want their children to receive good marks and advance to the next grade, but don't expect a teacher to give your children a grade or an honor that they do not deserve. Make it clear to your children that grades are not "given" – they are earned. If your child receives an unsatisfactory report card or test score, use this as an opportunity to restate your commitment to high standards and explain why they are important to his or her future. Discuss with your child (and the teacher) what he or she will need to do differently to improve.

Attend school functions and know your child's school family

The teacher is the primary player in your child's school environment, but there are others who make a very valuable contribution. Attending parent-teacher conferences, back-to-school nights and other events are the best ways to become acquainted with them. If you cannot attend, send a note to your child's teacher stating that you welcome any messages or phone calls concerning your child's progress.

Communicate regularly and openly with your child's teacher and school staff

Keep track of your child's progress by asking the teacher what skills and subject matter your son or daughter will be learning over the course of the school year. Be prepared to let the teacher or other school staff know about your child's study habits, special interests and any health problems that may affect his or her learning. Make a list of questions before you speak with your child's teacher. The teacher will welcome this as a sign that you take your child's schooling very seriously. Some basic questions to ask a teacher or school staff are:

- How is my child doing in your class?
- Is he/she having any problems? What are the problems and how can the family help at home?
- How well does my child work independently and with others?
- How does my child seem to feel about school or his or her own abilities?

Listen carefully to the reports and statements from your child's teacher, counselor or school staff. This information will give you additional ideas for questions to ask.

Help your child keep pace

If your child needs help to improve his or her academic performance, ask a teacher if the school district offers after-school tutoring, summer programs or other activities that can be of assistance. Mentoring services are provided by many state, county and municipal agencies, private and non-profit organizations, corporations and school systems. A mentor is a trained, caring adult who is matched with one or more children and provides consistent attention and encouragement to help youngsters reach their full potential. Information about mentoring services in your area can be obtained from the Division of Family Development at the New Jersey Department of Human Services, 6 Quakerbridge Plaza, P. O. Box 716, Trenton, NJ 08625, 609-588-2401. Students can also find research and homework assistance on the Internet. A search for "homework help" will produce a number of useful web sites.

Know your school's discipline code

Read and discuss school rules with your children. Disruptive behavior in class prevents real learning from taking place. Make your expectations for your child's school conduct clear and support the conduct standards of the school.

Work with other parents at school

Just a little of your time can go a long way in helping your child succeed. Your involvement in school activities will show your child that you value a quality education. You can get involved by:

- Attending school board meetings and letting board members know you support high standards of student achievement
- Serving on school-based decision-making teams
- Joining your local Parent-Teacher Association (PTA) or another parents' group.
- Attend a FANS workshop if one is offered at your school. FANS (Families Achieving the New Standards) currently offers workshops for parents that focus on the new math, science and technology standards. Pilot workshops for world languages and language arts literacy are scheduled for the spring of 2000, with a full slate of workshops slated to begin in the fall of 2000.

Make sure homework gets done

Be sure to ask your children if they have homework. Parents should reinforce the importance of homework as the main way for a teacher to know whether a student understands what is being taught in the classroom. Help your children with homework but don't do it for them. Here are some helpful hints:

- Schedule daily homework times.
- Find a quiet spot in the home for your children to work.
- Turn off the television or music to make it quiet.
- Pick a location that is close enough for them to ask you or another family member questions about their assignment.
- Ask to see the finished homework.
- If your child often seems confused or unsure about homework assignments, contact the teacher yourself to discuss the matter.

Monitor the time your child spends on extracurricular activities

For many children, participating in sports, music/dance lessons or social clubs such as scouting is an important developmental activity. But too many extracurricular activities can cut into study time and cause stress that can interfere with your child's success in school. Here are some tips you can use to strike a healthy balance:

- Before your child takes on an extra activity, remind him or her that schoolwork takes top priority.
- Make sure your child understands that if grades begin to decline, he or she will be expected to cut back on activities.
- If possible, limit activities to weekends.
- If you strongly suspect that activities are interfering with studies, ask your child's teacher.
- Don't wait until the end of a grading period to find out.

Keep a watchful eye on your child's study habits at home

- Encourage reading in your home on a regular basis.
- Place limits on non-educational television.
- Establish clear discipline at home.
- Make school breaks and vacations family learning times.
- Expect achievement and offer praise.

Stay involved in your child's education.